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ABSTRACT

This article examines three strategies that seem to hold particular promise in addressing the root causes of aggressive, violent behavior among young people. These strategies are improved health and counseling services for expectant and new mothers, particularly those at risk for child abuse or neglect; school reform that emphasizes the importance of smaller, more personalized learning environments for students, particularly in high school; and the use of service learning (linking classroom learning to community service) to promote the intellectual, psychological, and moral development of young people. It has been found that the earliest months of life are a time in which violent behavior can be cultivated. Fortunately, prenatal and infant-care programs can dramatically reduce cases of child abuse, welfare dependency, alcohol and drug abuse, and maternal and juvenile arrests. For older children, smaller schools have been shown to improve attendance rates, lower dropout rates, and lessen discipline problems. These schools bring students closer to adults, meaning that young people are less likely to fall through the cracks. Other strategies, such as service learning, can result in significant improvement in student achievement, especially when that learning is combined with an academically rigorous classroom education. (RJM)

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The Progress of Education Reform 1999-2001

Youth Violence

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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What's inside

Three strategies to stem the tide of youth violence:

- Prenatal and infant care
- Small schools
- Service-learning

Stemming the Tide of Youth Violence

A spate of classroom killings and schoolyard shootings over the past two years has riveted the nation's attention, leaving us alarmed, saddened and asking the questions: "Why did this happen?" and "What can we do to prevent it from happening again?"

In statehouses across the nation, legislators have responded with dozens of measures aimed at cracking down on school violence, primarily in the form of stiffer penalties for students who assault or threaten others, bring weapons into schools or perpetrate bomb scares. But state policymakers also are looking at a variety of measures focused on prevention and intervention – from toll-free tip lines, anti-bullying programs and character education classes, to mandatory, comprehensive school-safety plans.

In the last decade, there has been a major breakthrough in understanding the causes of youth violence and developing effective programs and strategies to prevent it. Some of these programs focus on the family, some on the school and some on the neighborhood or community. Taken together, such efforts can help ensure that every school provides a safe, positive and stimulating environment for teaching and learning.

This issue of *The Progress of Education Reform 1999-2001* takes an in-depth look at three strategies that seem to hold particular promise in terms of addressing the root causes of aggressive, violent behavior among young people:

- Improved health and counseling services for expectant and new mothers, particularly those at risk for child abuse or neglect
- New school reform approaches that emphasize the importance of smaller, more personalized learning environments for students, particularly in high school
- Growing interest in the use of service-learning (linking classroom learning to community service) to promote the intellectual, psychological and moral development of young people.

To find out more...

- Visit the ECS home page (www.ecs.org) for a summary of new and emerging state policies on school safety, along with a list of the 10 best Web sites for researching information on school safety and violence prevention. Another good source for up-to-date information on state policy action on this topic is www.stateline.org.
- After reviewing 450 violence-prevention programs, the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence (CSPV) selected 10 model approaches that meet rigorous research standards. Profiles on the 10 models, along with a variety of information about violence prevention, can be found on CSPV's Web site, www.colorado.edu/cspv/.

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To find out more...

- Research findings on home-visit programs in Elmira and other cities are contained in a 1998 RAND report, *Investing in Our Children: What We Know and Don't Know About the Costs and Benefits of Early Childhood Interventions*. It is available from RAND Distribution Services for $15. Phone: 310-451-7002; fax: 310-451-6915; e-mail: order@rand.org. Also, the Information Clearinghouse section of the ECS Web site (www.ecs.org) offers policy briefs and reports on early childhood and care.

Prenatal and Infant Care

A strong and growing body of evidence points to the earliest months of life as a time in which violent behavior can be born and cultivated. The latest research on infant brain development reveals that the roots of violence can be sown before birth and well-entrenched by preschool.

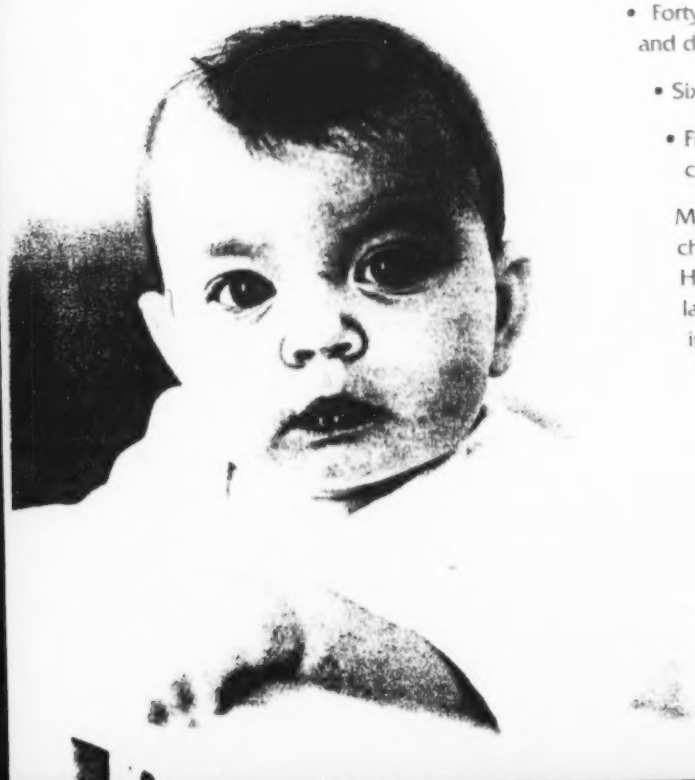
Today, there is a growing chorus of advocates – from law-enforcement officials to child-development experts – calling for a major expansion of health and counseling programs for families whose children are at greatest risk of abuse and neglect. One approach that has been extensively tested, with encouraging results, is the provision of regular, in-home services during a woman's pregnancy and the first two years of her child's life.

Such programs are designed to help women improve their prenatal health and the outcomes of pregnancy; enhance the care provided to infants and toddlers in an effort to improve their health and development; and improve women's own personal development, giving particular attention to the planning of future pregnancies, women's education achievement and parents' participation in the work force. Typically, a nurse visitor is assigned to a family and works with that family through the duration of the program.

One such program, the Prenatal and Early Infancy Project, has been tested with both white and black low-income families, in rural and urban settings. In a 15-year follow-up study in Elmira, New York, for example, findings showed that low-income and unmarried women and their children who were provided with a nurse home visitor had, in contrast to those in a comparison group:

- Seventy-nine percent fewer verified reports of child abuse or neglect
- Thirty-one percent fewer subsequent births
- Thirty months less receipt of Aid to Families with Dependent Children
- Forty-four percent fewer maternal behavioral problems due to alcohol and drug abuse
- Sixty-nine percent fewer maternal arrests
- Fifty-six percent fewer arrests on the part of the 15-year-old children.

Many parents desperately need, and want, more knowledge about child development and parenting skills. States such as Missouri and Hawaii have led the way in showing how to implement effective, large-scale parenting education and family resource programs, including in-home coaching and counseling, without intruding on family privacy. Communities in these and other states have used a variety of local, state and federal funding sources to support such programs, including Medicaid, welfare reform, maternal and child health, and child abuse prevention dollars.



Small Schools

During this century, the size of schools has grown tremendously, particularly in urban areas. Nationwide since World War II, the number of schools declined 70%, while average size grew fivefold. More than one in four secondary schools nationwide enrolls over 1,000 students, and enrollments of 2,000 and 3,000 are not uncommon.

The thinking behind large schools was that bigger meant more extracurricular opportunities, a more diverse curriculum and more resources for students as a result of economies of scale. Intuitively, this makes sense; a growing body of research and public opinion, however, indicates this approach is misguided and that, when it comes to school size, smaller is actually better.

Research has shown that students from smaller schools have better attendance rates, and that when students move from large schools to smaller ones their attendance improves. Smaller schools also have lower dropout rates and fewer discipline problems. A 1992 study by researchers Jean Stockard and Maralee Mayberry stated that "behavior problems are so much greater in larger schools that any possible virtue of larger size is cancelled out by the difficulties of maintaining an orderly learning environment."

In addition, according to researcher Kathleen Cotton, larger school size has not translated into more extracurricular participation. In a 1996 study, Cotton found that in smaller schools, students are more likely to be involved in extracurricular activities and to hold positions of responsibility in those activities. Nor are larger schools more efficient. A 1996 study by researchers Valerie Lee and Julie Smith found that large schools are actually more expensive because their sheer size requires more administrative support. More important, additional bureaucracy translates into less flexibility and innovation.

Perhaps the most important benefit of smaller schools is the closer connection students have with adults, making them less likely to fall through the cracks. In a 1996 article in *Educational Leadership*, former New York City high school principal Deborah W. Meier wrote that large schools breed anonymity, which, in turn, breeds anger, frustration and a sense of disconnectedness. "The data are clear that the smaller the school, the fewer the incidents of violence, as well as vandalism and just plain rudeness," Meier wrote. "Small schools offer what metal detectors and guards cannot: the safety and security of being where you are known well by people who care for you."

When asked in a 1997 study by the Hudson Institute why they had chosen charter schools instead of traditional public schools, 53% of parents cited small school size. It was the most frequent response, ahead of higher standards, education philosophy, greater parental involvement and better teachers. It is also telling that urban parents, whose children are most likely to be in excessively large schools, are also the parents most likely to express dissatisfaction with their public schools.

While there is no agreement about what school size is ideal, the consensus of researchers is that no school should serve more than 1,000 students and that elementary schools should not exceed 300 to 400 students. There is also a general acknowledgment that the huge 2,000-, 3,000-, and 4,000-student schools now in use are much too large.

Restructuring schools to create an environment in which teachers know their students well is a key focus of the Coalition of Essential Schools, the School Development Program and other comprehensive school reform models that have emerged over the past decade. Typically, these models encourage mixed-age classrooms, reduced teaching loads and other strategies aimed at creating a more personalized learning environment.

To find out more...

- In an article for *Educational Leadership* entitled "The Big Benefits of Smallness," Deborah W. Meier provides seven good reasons why small schools work. The article is available on the Web at www.acsd.org/pubs/el/sep96/meier.
- The Hudson Institute report, *Charter Schools as Seen by Those Who Know Them Best: Students, Teachers and Parents*, is available online at www.edexcellence.net/chart/chart1.htm.
- Malcolm Shabazz City High School in Madison, Wisconsin, prides itself on having created a "healthy, harassment-free learning environment in which all students are able to feel safe, engaged, productive and respectful of one another." For more information about Shabazz, its students, its curriculum and its unique policies and programs, visit the school's Web site at www.madison.k12.wi.us/shabazz/.
- ECS has published a variety of publications on comprehensive school reform. Check the ECS Web site (www.ecs.org) or call 303-299-3692 to order or request a products catalog.

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Service-Learning

Educators, researchers and community leaders increasingly see involving students in service-learning activities as a powerful strategy for enhancing young people's intellectual, psychological and moral development.

Service-learning combines service to the community with academically rigorous classroom education. It is not about "going out and doing good." It involves learning and using intellectual skills, performing needed service and producing real results that command respect. Service-learning provides students with the skills and virtues that enable them to fully participate in a civil society and contribute to the sustainability of a democracy.

For example, students in South Carolina conducted a needs assessment and found their local rural community needed a fire department. They secured the property and built the fire department, resulting in a reduction in the cost of homeowners' insurance in the area. The community also decided to allow the students to train as volunteer firefighters, which resulted in a tripling of the number of trained volunteers. "The real impact," said Marion District Four Superintendent Milt Marley, "is the manner in which service-learning has reconnected our youth to the community."

Over the past several years, various studies and reports have pointed to the positive effects of service-learning. A 1997 nationwide study by Brandeis University, for example, showed that service-learning participants scored significantly higher than their peers in several areas: overall gradepoint average, math and science test scores, education aspirations and school engagement. In another example, a recent report on the Florida Learn and Serve program showed consistently strong improvement over a three-year period in attendance, grades and conduct. Eighty-three percent of the reporting schools showed improved attendance rates, and 80% of the sites had fewer disciplinary referrals.

Today, schools in all 50 states have service-learning programs. According to a recent study by the University of Minnesota, the number of high school students involved in such programs has risen significantly over the past few years - from roughly 900,000 students in 1984 to more than 12 million in 1997. Said one high school senior of her service-learning experience: "Service-learning is a way to teach the standards so that students see how what they are learning fits in real-world situations."

To find out more...

- Information about service-learning, including ECS' new Compact for Learning and Citizenship initiative, is available on the ECS Web site (www.ecs.org). For information on the University of Minnesota and Brandeis University studies, visit the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse at www.nicsl.coled.umn.educ

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